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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA REACTION, JULY 12-16: FORMATION OF NEW GOVERNMENT; ISLAMIZATION; STUDENT VISAS

¶1. SUMMARY: The composition of the new Kuwaiti Council of Ministers (Cabinet) has generated considerable criticism. Despite a reported seven new ministers, the government is seen by a substantial cross section of opinion (ranging from liberals to the Islamist Salafi Movement) as mediocre, with one writer commenting, "If this is the government we have, we're heading for crisis." Some prominent Islamists and liberals, however, still evince optimism that the separation of the post of prime minister from that of crown prince will bring about political reforms.

All newspapers report calls by leading Islamists for the "Islamization of laws and the implementation of Sharia." A liberal writer attacks statements made this week by an Islamist MP that the Ministry of Education should not be given to someone "Westernized."

One daily published letters from readers complaining that "stringent" American visa procedures "deprive students of the chance to study in Uncle Sam's land." END SUMMARY.

¶2. News Stories: On July 15, all newspapers lead with news of the announcement the new Council of Ministers (Cabinet), selected by Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad and appointed by the Amir. Reports indicate that of the fourteen ministers selected (with one portfolio, Social Affairs, still unassigned), five are members of the ruling family, down from seven in the last government, and only one elected MP was selected, down from four previously. Seven of the fourteen ministers served in the last government.

All newspapers report the merging of the Ministries of Oil and of Electricity and Water into a new Ministry of Energy headed by former acting Minister of Oil, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Al-Seyassah reports that businessmen in Kuwait are "optimistic" about the selection of Abdullah Al-Taweel as Minister of Commerce and Industry, seeing him as "rational" and "unprejudiced."

The Islamist Salafi Movement issued a statement on the new government calling it "weak and below the citizen's expectations," reports Al-Rai Al-Aam. Al-Qabas reports that Abdullah Al-Nibari, the Secretary General of the Kuwait Democratic Forum, hopes the new government is less "destructive" than its predecessor, but feels it is "below our expectations."

All newspapers report calls by Islamist leaders for the "Islamization of laws and the implementation of Sharia." Al-Watan reports that the Secretary General of the Popular Islamic Salafi Group, Khalid Sultan Al-Issa, said the group's agenda also includes "protecting Islamic charities from foreign intervention" and "protecting of society from Westernization."

Jassem Bin Sultan Al-Yaseen, Chairman of Charitable Committees at the Social Reform Society, wrote in Al-Watan on July 12 that due to importance of young people in the parliamentary elections, the Islamic movement must "pay attention to youth and involve them in political activities."

Al-Qabas reports on July 16 that "informed legal sources" reject of questioning of the integrity of the recently completed electoral process.

On the "Public Comment" page of Al-Qabas on July 12, several readers expressed frustration at "stringent" American visa procedures that "deprive large numbers of Kuwaiti government scholarship students of the ability to study in Uncle Sam's land."

Editorials:

13. "A New Government Without Anything New"
Salah Al-Mudahf wrote in independent Al-Qabas (7/16): "It is obvious that the new government is comprised of the same faces and mentalities. With all due respect to the Cabinet members, I believe that some of them do not meet the requirements of the twenty-first century. Kuwait needs young and active figures that are capable of foresight."

14. "A Government on the Road to Crisis"
Salwa Al-Saeed wrote in independent Al-Seyassah (7/15): "We expected a government that is capable of addressing major reforms. We expected an extraordinary government that could market its projects and communicate with the people. Unfortunately, some of the members of the new government have no grasp of reality and have no interest in domestic challenges. The new government lacks decision makers and influential figures. If this is the government we have, then we are heading towards a crisis."

15. "The Appointed Prime Minister"
Abdelatif Al-Duajj wrote in independent Al-Qabas (7/15): "In light of the formation of the new Prime Minister and the manner adopted to select the Cabinet members, one can expect no significant changes in running the country. Sheikh Sabah himself has confirmed this by stating that he will follow the footsteps of Sheikh Saad. Due to the problems we experienced in the past, we believe that we will continue through the same dark tunnel. We hope that we are wrong."

16. "The Enemies of Democracy"
Liberal Director of Kuwait University's Center for Future and Strategic Studies, Dr. Shamlan Al-Essa wrote in independent Al-Seyassah (7/15): "Islamist MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei called on Sheikh Sabah to alienate the liberals and the 'Westernized' from the Ministries of Education and Information. What the Islamic powers are attempting to achieve is maintenance of the status quo, implementation of Islamic Sharia law and the Islamization of laws. The hegemony of the Islamic powers over the Ministry of Education has led to thousands of students graduating without the belief in creativity, which has led some instead to believe in Jihad."

17. "Towards a Popular Government and Full Supervision"
Islamist MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaei wrote in independent Al-Watan (7/15): "The separation of the two positions [of Crown Prince and Prime Minister] represents a great step for Kuwait as it represents the breaking of a tradition that is not mentioned in the constitution. This action will help lead to the removal of other rigid traditions, such as limiting certain positions in the government to the Al-Sabah family, a provision also not also mentioned in the constitution. The separation of the two positions will also help in achieving full supervision of the MPs."

18. "The Separation of the Two Posts: A New Era"
Dr. Shafiq Al-Ghabra wrote in independent Al-Rai Al-Aam (7/16): "It was tradition to appoint the Crown Prince as the Prime Minister to form a government, but this tradition has been broken because of Sheikh Saad's illness. This may open doors in the future to others from the Royal family [other than the Crown Prince] and qualified citizens to hold the position of Prime Minister. The separation may also pave the road for the public to occupy important posts in the government [as ministers]. This could be the beginning of the political reform in Kuwait. The appointment of Sheikh Sabah as Prime Minister may mean much for reform and the reformers."